

by Timothy Snyder

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A woman in the Jewish ghetto of Lodz, Poland, 1940–1944; from *Memory Unearthed: The Lodz Ghetto Photographs of Henryk Ross*, edited by Maia-Mari Sutnik, published by the Art Gallery of Ontario, and distributed by Yale University Press

How does Timothy Snyder's *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* differ from previous histories of the Holocaust? Like many other historians, Snyder begins with a careful analysis of Hitler and his ideology, but he is not concerned with the broader, long-term context of German and European culture and the anti-Semitic tradition that provided the milieu in which Hitler's views found resonance. His geographical focus, as in his previous book *Bloodlands* (2010), is on Eastern Europe, rather than Germany. His political focus is first on East European diplomacy, then Soviet and Nazi policies of occupation and state destruction, rather than on Nazi decision-making and Jewish policy per se. The people at the center of his story are less often German perpetrators and Jewish victims and more often East European collaborators and various kinds of rescuers. And to a far greater extent than any other historians who have tackled this subject, Snyder is explicitly concerned with the lessons of the Holocaust and warnings for the future.

Snyder begins by setting out what he dubs "Hitler's portrait of a planetary ecosystem." Races were real, different, and unequal, and they competed in a zero-sum game for the planet's limited resources (land and food). For Germans to live and live well (what Snyder considers the two meanings of the word *Lebensraum*), others races—which at this particular time meant for Hitler the Slavs of Eastern Europe—had to be defeated, displaced, and decimated.

The Jews, on the other hand, were not another race competing in the zero-sum game for *Lebensraum* decreed by the law of nature, but a subhuman pestilence or unnatural nonrace that threatened nature at large and Germans in particular by spreading the ideas of ethics, conscience, and common humanity. Such ideas subverted every race's capacity to wage the inexorable, no-holds-barred racial struggle necessary for survival. The eternal Jewish conspiracy of humanitarianism and morality manifested itself in various pernicious forms throughout history, such as Christianity's "love thy neighbor." (To this one should add Liberalism's "equality before the law.") Above all Snyder focuses on Hitler's obsession (shared by many others) with the twentieth-century manifestation of the Jewish danger in the form of Judeo-Bolshevism.



For Snyder, therefore, Hitler's ultimate vision of an attack upon the Soviet Union would combine a "victorious colonial war against Slavs with a glorious anti-colonial struggle against the Jews." In this way "a single attack on a single state, the Soviet Union, could solve all the problems of the Germans at the same time," as Germany would both "win an empire and restore the planet." Then, illogically and unpersuasively in my opinion, Snyder argues for the temporal primacy of the anti-Slav war. "If the [colonial] war was won, Jews could be eliminated as convenient. If Germans were somehow held back by inferior Slavs, then Jews would bear the consequence." I will return later to this interpretation of the immediate origins of the Final

Solution as a reaction to or consolation prize for the failure of Operation Barbarossa.

The path that Hitler actually took to the attack upon the Soviet Union was not, however, the one he expected. Both Poland and Germany wanted to expand their territories. (Poland joined Nazi Germany in making demands upon Czechoslovakia in 1938—for the Sudetenland and Teschen respectively.) Both were anti-Communist. (Poland had fought a successful war against the Soviet Union between 1919 and 1921 and thereby had taken over former tsarist territories with Ukrainian and Byelorussian majorities.) And both wanted to be rid of their Jewish populations. The post-Pilsudski regime in Poland after 1935 had a goal of 90 percent Jewish emigration.

Thus Hitler presumed there was common ground for a joint German-Polish campaign against the Soviet Union. But Hitler did not understand that while Germany had a “recolonial” agenda, Poland was a “decolonial” power that owed its existence to the collapse of empires and the establishment of nation-states in Eastern Europe. Poland understood that it could survive as an independent nation-state only by preserving the status quo, and thus rejected Hitler’s alliance offers that inevitably would have reduced Poland to the status of a subordinate satellite.

In what is perhaps the most unusual feature of a book on the Holocaust, Snyder devotes many pages to Poland, Zionism, and Palestine. He argues that Poland envisaged solving its own Jewish problem not through alliance with Nazi Germany but rather through promoting Revisionist Zionism. Through financing, training, and arming Betar—a paramilitary youth organization of the right-wing Revisionist Zionists—for a policy of resistance and terror against the British Mandate (in line with Poland’s decolonial position), the Polish regime hoped for the creation of a Jewish state that would open up Palestine for large-scale Jewish emigration from Poland. The Irgun (led by Menachem Begin) and its fringe splinter group Lehi (led by Avraham Stern and Yitzhak Shamir)—the mainstays of the future Likud Party—cannot be understood outside their Polish origins, Snyder argues.

More controversial will be the parallel Snyder draws between Ukrainian nationalists and Lehi. Like “fringe” Ukrainian nationalists who hoped to obtain Ukrainian statehood through ties with Nazi Germany, Snyder argues, Lehi eventually succumbed to the temptation to sound out Nazi Germany on the possibility of cooperation based on their shared goal of getting Jews out of Europe and their shared “totalitarian” worldviews. It should be noted that while there is no record of a German reply to this pathetic and deluded feeler by Lehi, the Nazis’ exploitation of Ukrainian hopes for statehood was horrifically successful.

Following the final Polish rejection of his alliance offers in January 1939, Hitler resolved to attack Poland instead. To isolate Poland beforehand, Hitler took the occasion of his January 30 Reichstag speech to threaten those he presumed to be the Jewish wire-pullers controlling the major powers. Specifically, he warned that a new world war (as opposed to a local conflict between Germany and Poland) would result in the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe. Since these presumed Jewish wire-pullers had no existence outside Hitler’s own imagination, his threat had no resonance.

His destruction of the remaining Czechoslovak state in March produced just the opposite effect in the form of a French and British guarantee to defend Poland. Hitler had to improvise the nonaggression pact of August 1939 with the Soviet Union, temporarily conceding a large swath of Eastern Europe to Stalin, with the result that the two dictatorships could unleash their mutual attack upon Poland and bring about its partition and destruction.

Snyder stipulates that “minorities depend the most on the protection of the state and upon the rule of law,” and thus the fateful consequences of state destruction for the Jews of Europe is the major theme of his book. The Nazi destruction of Austria in 1938 provided a hint of things to come. The Nazis found large numbers of locals eager to carry out rituals of humiliation that confirmed the Jews’ new helplessness, and the total expropriation and accelerated expulsion of Austrian Jews quickly followed.

With the extinction of the Polish state in 1939, “the true Nazi revolution had begun.” Forcing the Jews into ghettos facilitated the theft of the Jewish property that Germans wanted, but it also gave a signal to impoverished Poles that they could steal whatever remained. The Germans created a situation that Snyder calls “relative deprivation,” in which “Polish theft of Jewish property did not make Poles allies of the

Germans, but it did make them seek to justify what they had done and tend to support any policy that kept the Jews from regaining what had been theirs." Moreover, the last surviving fragments of the Polish state—the local police and local administration—were "now unmoored from previous law and tradition" and made "responsible for the implementation of German racial policies."

If the German occupation and destruction of the state in western Poland "opened a realm of experimentation" ominous for the Jews, the "double occupation" and "double destruction of states" in eastern Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Bessarabia—first by the Soviet Union in 1939–1940 and then by Germany in 1941—was even more fateful. This region was, of course, the epicenter of Snyder's "bloodlands," where mass killing was concentrated. In his new book, it is the region where the Holocaust began, in large part because of the apt conditions that the Stalinist occupation created for the subsequent Nazi occupation to exploit. Psychologically, the Soviet occupation generated feelings of shame and resentment in Eastern Europeans. "Jews were never the majority of local collaborators" with the Soviets. They had "never held real power" in areas occupied by the Soviets, and in reality had "suffered as much or more than any other group under Soviet rule" from disproportionate confiscations and deportations. Yet the Jews necessarily saw the Soviets as "the lesser evil" and this made them "collectively vulnerable" for acts of revenge.

Economically, the Soviet seizure of all private property left Jewish property in particular up for grabs when the Germans arrived. Politically, pervasive local collaboration by non-Jews with the Soviet authorities could be erased by an act of "double collaboration." That is, the German collaborative offer was that local populations could cleanse their own past by cleansing their communities of the Jews.

The murder of the Jews was thus, Snyder writes, a "joint creation" of "the greater evil," the basis for which was laid in three stages. First, the rituals of humiliation and degradation of Jews by the local populations were "a political scenography by which the local population performed Nazi ideology," publicly defining communism as Jewish and thereby exonerating themselves from their own behavior under Soviet occupation. Second, pogroms that were "anything but a spontaneous reaction" were instigated by Germans with the help of local ex-Communists and former Soviet collaborators who provided themselves with "the perfect escape route" to purge themselves of the stain of their previous collaboration by killing Jews.

Third, while the Germans came "to understand that pogroms were not an effective way to eliminate Jews," they were "an appropriate way to find murderers who could be recruited for organized actions." The Arajs Commando in Latvia, an auxiliary police force, became the most notorious example of many such local units, killing or assisting in the killing of 40,000 of the country's 66,000 Jews.

While Snyder pays attention to differences among eastern Poland, western and eastern Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and German-occupied Russian territory, he makes several crucial generalizations. First, he writes that indigenous anti-Semitism did not correlate with local killing. The fatality rates in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, where the anti-Semitic tradition was weak, were just as high as in eastern Poland or the western Ukraine, where it was strong.

Second, collaboration in mass killing of Jews may have begun in the zone of double occupation, but it was not restricted to the borderland nationalities living there. "The Germans were aided in their campaign of murder by members of all Soviet nationalities they encountered," for everywhere the Germans encountered a local appetite for Jewish property and above all the need to cleanse a Soviet past. "The politics of the greater evil meant proclaiming the destruction of Jewish communism while arranging for communists to kill Jews."



Stephen Shore

Tzal Nusymovych, a Jewish Ukrainian in his nineties who fought at the Battle of Stalingrad and later returned to live in the house that his family had fled in 1941, Korsun, Cherkaska District, Ukraine, 2012; photograph by Stephen Shore from his book *Survivors in Ukraine*, to be published this month by Phaidon, with an introduction by Jane Kramer

This phenomenon of double collaboration, therefore, "was the rule rather than the exception." If in *Bloodlands* the local populations in much of Eastern Europe seemed like rather passive figures struggling to

survive between the millstones of Hitler and Stalin, in *Black Earth* their agency and agendas have been restored.

In my opinion this stark picture needs to be qualified in several ways. First, not all rituals of humiliation were a "political scenography" that "performed Nazi ideology." In some rural areas of Lithuania, for instance, local rituals of humiliation featured older Christian anti-Jewish motives, indicating a more complex situation in which the successive arrival of the Soviets and the Nazis rendered older tensions and divisions lethal for the first time, but local populations did not entirely lose their own voices.¹

Second, the possibility of erasing a Soviet past may have been an important aspect in Nazi recruitment (as suggested also by the historian and sociologist Jan Gross), but it was not the only one. The earliest recruits to the Arajs Commando, for instance, were Viktor Arajs's fraternity brothers and friends as well as teenagers from families victimized by the Soviet deportations. Subsequently the Arajs group recruited from all ranks of society.² And in the two trials of Ukrainian collaborators for which I served as a historical expert witness, neither defendant had served the Soviets first. Here Snyder has mistaken the part for the whole.

Unlike many historians, Snyder does not give much attention to the twists and turns of Nazi decision- and policy-making.³ He rightly points out that into the spring of 1942, the Nazis had starved far more Slavs—especially in the POW camps—than they had shot Jews. But I think he is incorrect in arguing that the faltering campaign on the eastern front and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, presenting Germany with a prolonged world war, "allowed" Hitler to "slip" from a colonial war to a war for the planetary annihilation of the Jews. In this view, argued most articulately by Christian Gerlach,⁴ the Final Solution was the product of Nazi military failure and frustration, dating to Pearl Harbor and the Red Army counterattack defending Moscow in December 1941. I have argued, in contrast, that the key tipping point toward the Final Solution occurred in the setting of premature euphoria about their likely victory among the Nazi leaders, dating to the previous September and October.

During these two fateful months, when the Germans experienced an unbroken string of military successes that raised the prospect once again of imminent victory, a cluster of ominous developments took place. The Nazis experimented with three methods of mass killing by poison gas (carbon monoxide in either sealed trucks or sealed huts and the fumigant Zyklon B). A number of places were considered as sites for using poison gas, and three were initially selected at Belzec (where camp construction began on November 1), Chelmno, and Mogilev (the crematoria ovens ordered for that camp were eventually shipped to Birkenau instead).

Hitler reversed his previous position and approved the deportation of Jews from the Third Reich to Eastern Europe, which began on October 15. On October 23, Adolf Eichmann met with his "Jewish experts" in Berlin, and one attendee immediately informed a friend that "in the near future many of the Jewish vermin will be exterminated through special measures." A Spanish government request to remove Spanish Jews from German-occupied France to Spanish Morocco was rejected on the grounds that "these Jews would also be too much out of the direct reach of the measures for a basic solution to the Jewish Question." On October 23, 1941, all further Jewish emigration was forbidden, reversing the previous policy of trying to expel Jews from the Third Reich by whatever path. And frustrated German authorities in Serbia were assured that the Jewish women and children left behind after the army shot all the male Jews would not be a permanent burden, for

as soon as the technical possibility exists within the framework of a total solution to the Jewish question, the Jews will be deported...to the reception camps in the east.⁵

Hitler himself was unusually unguarded in statements made in the third week of October. To Fritz Sauckel and Fritz Todt, both high officials, he noted that the native populations in the east would be treated "as Indians" and "sifted," while "we are getting rid of the destructive Jews entirely." And to Himmler, just returned from announcing plans for the construction of gas chambers at Mogilev, he proclaimed: "It is good when the terror precedes us that we are exterminating the Jews."⁶ In short, I would argue that by late October 1941 a vision had already crystallized for deporting *all* European Jews (even Spanish Jews in France and Jewish women and children in Belgrade) to camps in the east and exterminating them "through

special measures”—that is, poison gas.

Such an interpretation is both more in accord with the evidence and more consistent with Snyder's own portrayal of Hitler's views on the Jews' role in history. It is also in line with the pattern of past behavior, when Nazi Jewish policy was radicalized at successive peaks of victory. In September 1939, once he was sure that Stalin had kept his commitment and the French had stayed put behind the Maginot Line, Hitler approved a drastic demographic reordering of Poland, including the ethnic cleansing of Polish and German Jews, who were to be expelled to the Lublin Reservation. In late May 1940, with the best units of the Allied armies trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk and the fall of France in sight, Hitler approved the Madagascar Plan for the expulsion of all Jews from Europe. In mid-July 1941, when the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed imminent, the *Einsatzgruppen* were reinforced by a dozen police battalions and two SS brigades, and the formation of native auxiliary police units was approved. By August, large-scale massacres that now also targeted Jewish women and children had begun.

The systematic mass murder of Soviet Jewry by the Nazis was underway. And in October 1941, flush with the encirclement of Leningrad, the capture of Kiev, and the breakthrough on the central front at Vyazma and Bryansk, Hitler extended the Final Solution to the rest of European Jewry, to be accomplished through deportation eastward to camps that were to be built and equipped with poison gas facilities. The Final Solution was not Hitler's consolation prize for military disappointment; it was yet another radicalization of Nazi Jewish policy spurred by mistaken victory euphoria.

Beyond Eastern Europe Snyder's treatment is much briefer and focused on three points. The first is the "Auschwitz paradox." Though Auschwitz has become the most prominent and "convenient" symbol of the Holocaust, paradoxically more than half the Jews the Nazis intended to be murdered there survived, because they never boarded a train to take them there. Second, they avoided deportation, Snyder writes, because in these regions state destruction was not complete, unlike in Eastern Europe. Dependent satellites (Slovakia, Croatia), conquered states (France, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Yugoslavia, and Greece), and allied states (Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania) all retained varying degrees of sovereignty that shielded Jews to some extent from unfettered German power (although the Romanians and Croatians eliminated many Jews on their own). Third, the aspects of sovereignty that protected Jews were both the capacity to make foreign policy and the preservation of citizenship and bureaucracy.

Much of this is in line with the consensus of Holocaust historiography, particularly that Jewish fatality rates correlated most closely with the degree of German power and control and expectation of German victory, and correlated only imperfectly with degrees of indigenous anti-Semitism. However, because scholars from Raul Hilberg and H.G. Adler to Zygmunt Baumann have emphasized the lethality of modern bureaucracy in Nazi hands, Snyder is offering a consciously contrarian view when he argues that it was not bureaucracy but the "removal of bureaucracy" or deportation of Jews to "bureaucracy-free zones in the East" that was fatal. This strikes me as a false dichotomy, in that it was a bureaucratically empowered Nazi state that destroyed other states, stripped Jews of their citizenship and other rights, organized the deportations, and staffed the stateless zones where the killing took place.

One of the most unusual features of *Black Earth* is Snyder's devoting no fewer than three chapters (some 20 percent of the text) to aspects of Holocaust rescue. In fact, while he sketches out the spectrum of people and institutions involved and the variety of ways in which they sometimes saved lives, these chapters more often convey complexities and ambiguities rather than uplifting and hagiographic tales of exemplary altruism.

In Snyder's telling, for instance, the Japanese consul in Kaunas, Lithuania, Chiune Sugihara, worked with Polish agents to create a Japanese transit visa scheme to rescue endangered Poles who had fled to Lithuania. In practice two thirds of those who used this visa scheme turned out to be Polish Jews, thanks to Sugihara, though that had not been the original purpose of the Poles who helped devise the scheme.

In another instance Izrael Pińczuk saved himself by joining the Soviet partisans, but then had to recruit local Ukrainians who had previously robbed and killed Jews. The priority of the Soviet partisans was neither Jewish rescue nor Holocaust justice but victory over the Germans. For Snyder, "rescue was usually grey."

Many people have a notorious record of selectively remembering and forgetting the past, of appropriating and distorting history, and thereby using and abusing history for their own purposes. Any attempt to draw lessons and to issue "warnings" from any historical event is a perilous venture. In view of this record, such lessons and warnings drawn from history usually are more revealing of the mind and current agenda of the admonisher than a sober and objective reflection about the past. The temptation to exploit the moral authority of the Holocaust or the stigmatizing power of an analogy with Nazism makes these topics particularly susceptible to moralizing.¹ In popular culture there is even a term—"Godwin's law"—for the near inevitability that virtually any online argument will eventually lead to the use of an analogy involving Nazis or Hitler. Given the difficulties of deducing warnings from the Holocaust, how does Snyder's bold venture onto this terrain fare?

Snyder notes that in the postwar period of the Green Revolution, the world enjoyed a brief respite from food scarcity and experienced a growing stability of states providing the protection of citizenship. In such a historical setting, the world of Hitler can seem distant and even irrelevant. But with the waning of the Green Revolution and the rising threat to food, water, and inhabitable land posed by climate change, Snyder envisages numerous possible scenarios of catastrophe around the world that could make Hitler's worldview of struggle for survival in a zero-sum ecosystem relevant again.

Most interesting in my opinion is his assertion that serious misunderstandings "underlay an American myth of the Holocaust," above all that it was the product of the "overweening" and "all-powerful" state, so that "the weakening of state authority appears salutary." Snyder dismisses both the left-wing version of this myth (the overweening state as an expression of modern society, Enlightenment hubris, and the drive for practical mastery) and the right-wing version (the regulatory, welfare state as inherently tyrannical). In contrast, he argues, "the state is for the recognition, endorsement, and protection of rights," and the Holocaust was made possible by the destruction of states. He advocates for a liberal, pluralistic society as well as for science unfettered by politicalization and denial in order to deal with climate change, propositions with which I readily agree.

But I think his view of the state again needs qualification. While the preservation of rights may require an effective state, it is not always the case that the state protects its citizens' rights. It is no myth that the destruction of states and rights in Europe, and of the lives of European Jews, was indeed carried out by an "overweening" state, Nazi Germany. To dismiss it as a "mutation" of a state, as does Snyder, is simply a semantic dodge. What is crucial here is the preservation of states that maintain political cultures based on human rights, democratic political processes, and constitutional limitations, not the preservation of states for their own sake. That is a proposition sensibly advocated long before the Holocaust.

1. 1

See T. Fielder Valone, "Destroying the Ties That Bind: Rituals of Humiliation and the Holocaust in Provincial Lithuania," *Traces: The UNC-Chapel Hill Journal of History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 2012). [_](#)

2. 2

See Richards Olafs Plavnieks, "Nazi Collaborators on Trial During the Cold War: The Cases Against Viktors Arajs and the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police," Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2013; Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1914–1944: The Missing Center* (Riga: Historical Institute of Latvia, 1996). [_](#)

3. 3

See Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (University of Nebraska Press, 2004). [_](#)

4. 4

Christian Gerlach, "The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of German Jews, and Hitler's Decision in

Principle to Exterminate All European Jews," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (December 1998). [_](#)

5. 5

Browning, *Origins of the Final Solution*, pp. 368–369. [_](#)

6. 6

Monologe im Führerhauptquartier 1941–1944: Die Aufzeichnungen Heinrich Heims, edited by Werner Jochmann (Hamburg: Albrecht Knaus, 1980), pp. 90–91 (entry of October 17) and p. 106 (entry of October 25, 1941). [_](#)

7. 7

For admonitions against using the Holocaust as a source of and authority for "lessons," see: Michael R. Marrus, "'Lessons' of the Holocaust and the Ceaseless Discordant Search for Meaning," in *Holocaust Scholarship: Personal Trajectories and Professional Interpretations*, edited by Christopher R. Browning, Susannah Heschel, Michael R. Marrus, and Milton Shain (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). [_](#)

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